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THE

LAW OF RETRIBUTION.

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THE

LAW OF RETRIBUTION.

TWO DISCOURSES.

GALATIANS, VI. 7.

"Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

I UNDERSTAND these words, my brethren, as laying down in some respects a stricter law of retribution, than is yet received even by those who are considered as its strictest interpreters. There is much dispute about this law at the present day; and there are many who are jealous, and very properly jealous, of every encroachment upon its salutary principles. But even those who profess to hold the strictest faith on this subject, and who, in my judgment, do hold a faith concerning what they call the infinity of man's ill-desert, that is warranted neither by reason nor scripture, — even they, nevertheless, do often present views of conversion and of God's mercy, and of the actual scene of retribution, which, in my apprehension, detract from the wholesome severity of the rule by which we are to be judged. Their views may be strong enough, too strong; and yet not strict enough, nor impressive enough. Tell a man that he deserves to suffer

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infinitely, and I am not sure, that it will, by any means come so near his conscience, as to tell him that he deserves to endure some small, but specific evil. Tell him that he deserves an infinity of suffering, and he may blindly assent to it; it is a vast and vague something that presses upon his conscience, and has no edge nor point: but, put a sword into the hand of conscience, and how might this easy assenter to the justice of infinite torments grow astonished and angry, if you were to tell him that he deserved to suffer but the amputation of a single finger! Or tell the sinner that he shall suffer for his offences a thousand ages hence, and though it may be true, and will be true, if he goes on offending till that period, yet it will not come home to his heart with half so vivid an impression, or half so effectual a restraint, as to make him foresee the pain, the remorse, and shame, that he will suffer the very next hour. Tell him, in fine, as it is common to do — tell him of retribution in the gross, and however strong the language, he may listen to it with apathy; he often does so; but if you could show him what sin is doing within him, at every moment; how every successive offence lays on another and another shade upon the brightness of the soul; how every transgression, as if it held the very sword of justice, is cutting off one by one, the fine and invisible fibres that bind the soul to happiness; and then, by all the love of happiness such a man must be interested, and concerned for himself. Or, tell the bad man that he must be converted, or he cannot be happy hereafter, and you declare to him an impressive truth; but how much would it add to the impression, if instead of leaving him to suppose that bare conversion — in the popular sense of that term — that the

brief work of an hour, would bring him to heaven, you should say to him, "you shall be just as happy hereafter, as you are pure and upright, and no more; you shall be just as happy as your character prepares you to be, and no more; your moral, like your mental character, though it may take its date or its impulse from a certain moment, is not formed in a moment; your character, that is to say, the habit of your mind, is the result of many thoughts, and feelings, and efforts, and these are bound together by many natural and strong ties, so that it is strictly true, and this is the great law of retribution: that all coming experience is to be affected by every present feeling; that every future moment of being must answer for every present moment; that one moment, sacrificed to sin or lost to improvement, is for ever sacrificed and lost; that one year's delay, or one hour's wilful delay, to enter the right path, is to put you back so far, in the everlasting pursuit of happiness; and that every sin — ay, every sin of a good man, is thus to be answered for, though not according to the full measure of its ill-desert, yet according to a rule of unbending rectitude and impartiality. This is undoubtedly the strict and solemn Law of Retribution: but how much its strictness has really entered — I say not now into our hearts and lives; I will take up that serious question in another season of meditation — but how much the strictness of the principles of retribution has entered into our creeds, our theories, our speculations, is a matter that deserves attention.

It is worthy of remark, indeed, that there is *no* doctrine which is more universally received, and at the same time more universally evaded, than this very doctrine which

we are considering. It is universally received, because the very condition of human existence involves it—because it is a matter of experience; every after period of life being affected, and known to be affected, by the conduct of every earlier period; manhood by youth, and age by manhood; professional success, by the preparation for it; domestic happiness, by conjugal fidelity and parental care. It is thus seen, that life is a tissue, into which the thread of this connection is every where interwoven. It is thus seen that the law of retribution presses upon every man, whether he thinks of it or not; that it pursues him through all the courses of life, with a step that never falters nor tires, and with an eye that never sleeps nor slumbers. The doctrine of a future retribution has been universally received, too, because it has been felt that in no other way, could the impartiality of God's government be vindicated; that if the best and the worst men in the world, if the ruthless oppressor and his innocent victim, if the proud and boasting injurer, and the meek and patient sufferer, are to go to the same reward, to the same approbation of the good and just God; there is an end of all discrimination, of all moral government, and of all light upon the mysteries of providence. It has been felt, moreover, that character carries with it, and in its most intimate nature, the principles of retribution, and that it must work out weal or wo for its possessor.

But this doctrine, so universally received, has been, I say, as universally evaded. The classic mythologies of paganism did, indeed, teach that there were infernal regions; but few were doomed to them, and for those few, who, failing of the rites of sepulture, or of some other ceremonial qualification, were liable to that doom, an

escape was provided by their wandering on the banks of the Styx awhile, as preparatory to their entering Elysium. So, too, the creed of the Catholics, though it spoke of hell, had, also, its purgatory to soften the horrors of retribution. And now there are, as I think, among the body of Protestants, certain speculative, or rather, may I say, mechanical views of the future state, and of the preparation for it, and of the principles of mercy in its allotments, that tend to let down the strictness of that law, which forever binds us to the retributive future.

Is it not a question, let me barely ask in passing, whether this universal evasion does not show that the universal belief has been extravagant; whether men have not believed too much, to believe it strictly and specifically to its minutest point? It certainly is a very striking fact, that while the popular creed teaches that almost the whole living world is going down to everlasting torments, the popular sympathy interposes to save from that doom almost the whole dying world.

But not to dwell on this observation, — I shall proceed now briefly to consider some of those modern views, which detract from the strictness of the law of retribution.

I. And the first which I shall notice is the view of the actual scene of retribution, as consisting of two conditions, entirely opposite, and altogether different. Mankind according to this view are divided into two distinct classes, the one of which is to enjoy infinite happiness, and the other to suffer infinite misery. It is a far stronger case, than would be made by the supposition, that man's varied efforts to gain worldly good, were to be rewarded by assigning to one portion of the race, bound-

less wealth, and to the other, absolute poverty; for it is infinite happiness on the one hand, and, not the bare destitution of it, but infinite misery, on the other.

Let me observe, before I proceed farther to point out what I consider to be the defect which attends this popular view of retribution, that the view itself is not warranted by scripture. The Bible teaches us that virtue will be rewarded, and sin punished; that the good shall receive good, and the evil shall receive evil; and that is all that it teaches us. It unfolds to us this simple, and solemn, and purely spiritual issue, and nothing more.

All else is figurative; and so the most learned interpreters have generally agreed to consider it. It is obvious, that representations of what passes in the future world, taken from the present world, must be of this character. When heaven is represented as a city, and hell as a deep abyss, and Christ is described as coming to judgment on a throne, with the state and splendor of an Oriental monarch, and separating *in form, and visibly* separating, the righteous from the wicked, we know, or should know, that these representations are figurative descriptions of a single and simple fact; and this fact is, and this is the whole of the fact that is taught us, that a distinction will be made between good men and bad men; and that they will be rewarded or punished hereafter, according to the character they have formed and sustained here.

It is to be remembered, too, in appealing to the Scriptures, that there are other teachings in them than those which are figurative, and teachings which bind us far more to the letter. It is written, that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap; and that God will render unto every man according to his deeds—i. e. according

to his character, as by deeds is doubtless meant in this instance.

But now to return to the view already stated, I maintain, that the boundless distinction which it makes in the states of the future life, is *not* rendering unto men according to their deeds; that is to say, according to their character. Because, of this character, there are many diversities, and degrees, and shades. Men differ in virtue, precisely as they differ in intelligence; by just as many, and imperceptible degrees. As many as are the diversities of moral education in the world, as numerous as are the shades of circumstance in life, as various as are the degrees of moral capacity and effort, in various minds, so must the results differ. If character were formed by machinery, there might be but two samples. But if it is formed by voluntary agency, the results must be as diversified and complicated as the operations of that agency. And the fact, which every man's observation must show him, undoubtedly is, that virtue in men differs just as intelligence does; differs, I repeat, by just as many and imperceptible degrees. But now suppose that men were to be rewarded for their intelligence hereafter. Would all the immense variety of cases be met by two totally different and opposite allotments? Take the scale of character, and mark on it, all the degrees of difference, and all the divisions of a degree. Now what point on the scale will you select, at which to make the infinite difference of allotments? Select it where you will, and there will be the thousandth part of a degree above, rewarded with perfect happiness, and a thousandth part of a degree below, doomed to perfect misery. Would this be right, with regard to the intelligence or virtue of men?

We are misled on this subject by that loose and inaccurate division of mankind, which is common, into the two classes of saints and sinners. We might as well say that all men are either strong or weak, wise or foolish, intellectual or sensual. So they are, in a general sense; but not in a sense that excludes all discrimination. And the language of the Bible when it speaks of the good and bad, of the righteous and wicked, is to be understood with the same reasonable discrimination; with the same reasonable qualification of its meaning, as when it speaks of the rich and poor. The truth is, the matter of fact is, that from the highest point of virtue, to the lowest point of wickedness, there are, I repeat, innumerable steps, and men are standing upon all these steps; they are actually found in all these gradations of character. Now to render to such beings according to their character, is not to appoint to them two totally distinct and opposite allotments, but just as many allotments as there are shades of moral difference between them.

But does not the Bible speak of two distinct classes of men as amenable to the judgment, and of *but* two; and does it not say of the one class, "these shall go away into everlasting fire," and of the other, "but the righteous into life eternal?" Certainly it does. And so do we constantly say, that the good shall be happy, and the bad shall be miserable in the coming world. But do we, or does the Bible intend to speak without any discrimination? Especially, can the omniscient scrutiny and the unerring rule be supposed to overlook any, even the slightest differences and the most delicate shades of character? On the contrary, we are told that "one star differeth from another in glory; and we are told that there

is a "lowest hell;" and we are led to admit that in the allotments of retributive justice, the best among bad men, and the worst among good men, may come as near to each other in condition, as they come in character.

I am not saying, let it be observed, that the difference even in this case is unimportant; still less that it is so, in general. Nay, and the difference between the states of the very good man and the very bad man, may indeed be as great as any theory supposes; it may be much greater, in fact, than any man's imagination conceives; but this is not the only difference that is to be brought into the final account; for there are many intermediate ranks between the best and the worst. I say, that the difference of allotment may — nay, and that it must be great. The truly good man, the devoted Christian, shall doubtless experience a happiness beyond his utmost expectation. The bad man, the self-indulgent, the self-ruined man, will doubtless find his doom severer than he had looked for. I say not what it may be. But this, at least, we may be sure of, that the consequences both of good and bad conduct, will be more serious, will strike deeper, than we are likely, amidst the gross and dim perceptions of sense, to comprehend.

But this is not the point which I am at present arguing. It is not the extent of the consequences; but it is the strict and discriminating impartiality which shall measure out these affecting results: it is the strict law by which every man shall reap the fruits of that which he sows. And I say that the artificial, imaginative, and, as I think, unauthorized, ideas which prevail with regard to a future life, let down the strictness of the law.

Let me now illustrate this by a single supposition.

Suppose that you were to live in *this* world, one thousand or ten thousand years; and suppose, too, that you felt that every present moment was a probation for every future moment; and that in order to be happy, you must be pure; that every fault, every wrong habit of life or feeling, would tend, and would continue, to make you unhappy, till it was faithfully and effectually corrected; and corrected by yourself — not by the hand of death, not by the exchange of worlds. Suppose yourself to entertain the conviction, that if you plunged into self-indulgence and sin, diseases and distempers and woes would accumulate upon you — with no friendly interposition or rescue, no all-healing nostrum, no medicine of sovereign and miraculous efficacy to save — that diseases, I say, and distempers and woes would accumulate upon you, in dark and darkening forms, for a thousand years. Suppose that every evil passion, anger, or avarice, or envy, or selfishness in any of its forms, would — unless resisted and overcome, — would make you more and more miserable, for a thousand years. I say, that such a prospect limited as it is in comparison, would be more impressive and salutary, a more powerful restraint upon sin, a more powerful stimulus to improvement, than the prospect, as it is usually contemplated, of the retributions of eternity! Are we then making all that we ought to make, of the prospect of an eternal retribution? God's justice will be as strict there, as it is here. And although bodily diseases may not accumulate upon us there, yet the diseases of the soul, if we take not heed to them, will accumulate upon us; and he who has only one degree of purity, and ten degrees of sin in him, must not lay that flattering unction to his soul, that death will "wash out the

long arrears of guilt." I know that this is a doctrine of unbending strictness — a doctrine, I had almost said, insufferably strict; but I believe that it is altogether true.

"But," some one may say, "if I am converted; if I have repented of my sins, and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, then, I have the assurance, through God's mercy of pardon and heaven."

This statement embraces the other doctrinal evasion of the law of retribution which I proposed to consider. And I must venture to express the apprehension that, by those who answer thus to the strict and unaccommodating demand of inwrought purity, neither conversion, nor repentance, nor the mercy of God, are understood as they ought to be.

A man says, "I am not to be judged by the law, but by the Gospel." But when he says that, let me tell him, he should take care to know what he says and whereof he affirms. The difference between the Law and the Gospel, I believe, is much misapprehended in this respect. The Gospel is not a more easy, not a more lax rule to walk by, but only a more encouraging rule. The Law demands rectitude, and declares that the sinner deserves the miseries of a future life; and there it stops, and of course it leaves the offender in despair. The Gospel comes in — and it did come in, with its teaching and prophetic sacrifices, even amidst the thunders of Sinai — saying, If thou wilt repent and believe, if thou wilt embrace the faith and spirit of the all-humbling and all-redeeming religion, the way to happiness is still open. But does the Gospel do any more than open the way? Does it make the way more easy, more indulgent, less self-denying? Does it say, you need not be as good as the Law

requires, and yet you shall be none the less happy for all that? Does it say, You need not do as well, and yet it shall be just as well with you? "Is Christ the minister of sin? God forbid!" Nay, be it remembered, that the solemn declaration upon which we are this day meditating—whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap—is recorded not in the law, but in the Gospel.

"But, if I repent," it may be said, "am I not forgiven entirely?" If you repent entirely, you are forgiven entirely; and not otherwise. What is repentance? It is a change of mind. That, as every scholar knows, is the precise meaning of the original word in the scriptures, which is translated repentance. It is a change of mind. If, then, your repentance, your change of mind, is entire, your forgiveness, your happiness is complete; but on no other principle, and in no other proportion. Sorrow is only one of the indications of this repentance, or change of heart; though it has, unfortunately, usurped, in common use, the whole meaning of the word. Sorrow is not the only indication of repentance; for joy as truly springs from it. It is not therefore the bare fact, that you are sorry, however sincerely and disinterestedly sorry, for your offences, that will deliver you from all the suffering which your sins and sinful habits must occasion. You may be sorry, for instance, and truly sorry, for your anger; yet if the passion breaks out again, it must again give you pain; and it must forever give you pain, while it lives. You may grieve for your vices. Does that grief instantly stop the course of penalty? Will it instantly repair a shattered constitution? You may regret, in declining life, a state of mind produced by too much devotion to worldly gain—the want of intellectual and moral

resources and habits. Will the dearth and the desolation depart from your mind, when that regret enters it? Will even the tears of repentance immediately cause freshness and verdure to spring up in your path?

"But," it may be said, once more, "does not all depend on our being converted, or being born again? And is not conversion, is not the new birth, the event of a moment?"

I answer with all the certainty of conviction that I am capable of—no; it is not the event of a moment. That conversion which fits a soul for heaven is *not* the event of a moment. And, my brethren, I would not answer thus in a case, where there is controversy, if I did not think it a matter of the most serious importance. Can any thing be more fatal — can any one of all loose doctrines be more loose, than to tell an offender who is going to the worst excesses in sin, that he may escape all the evil results — all the results of fifty, sixty, seventy years of self-indulgence — by one instant's experience? Can any one of us believe — dare we believe, that one moment's virtue can prepare us for the happiness of eternity? Can we believe this, especially, when we are, on every page of the Bible, commanded to watch, and pray, and strive, and labor, and by patient continuance in well-doing, to seek for glory, and honor, and immortality; and this, as the express condition of obtaining eternal life or happiness?

No, Christians! subjects of the Christian law! — no conversion, no repentance, no mercy of heaven, will save you from the final operation of that sentence, or should save you from its warning now — "Be not deceived" — as if there was special danger of being deceived here —

"be not not deceived ; God is not mocked ; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap : he that soweth to the flesh, shall of his flesh reap corruption ; but he that soweth to the spirit, shall of the spirit reap life everlasting."

It is a high, and strict—I had almost said—a terrible discrimination. Yet let us bring it home to our hearts ; although it be as a sword to cut off some cherished sin. Oh ! this miserable and slavish folly of inquiring whether we have enough piety and virtue to save us ! Do men ever talk thus about the acquisition of riches or honors ? Do they act, as if all their solicitude was to ascertain and to stop at, the point that would just save them from want, or secure them from disgrace ? "Enough virtue to save you" — do you say ? The very question shows that you have not enough. It shows that your views of salvation are yet technical, and narrow — if not selfish. It shows that all your thoughts of retribution yet turn to solicitude and apprehension.

The law of retribution is the law of God's goodness. It addresses not only the fear of sin, but the love of improvement. Its grand requisition is that of progress. It urges us at every step to press forward. And however many steps we may have taken, it urges us still to take another and another, by the same pressing reason with which it urged us to take the first step.

Yes, by the same pressing reason. Let him who thinks himself a good man, who thinks that he is converted, and is on the right side, and in the safe state, and in the way to heaven, and who, nevertheless, from this false reasoning and this presumptuous security, indulges in little sins — irritability, covetousness, or worldly pride — let him

know that his doom shall be hereafter, and is now, a *kind of hell*, compared with the blessedness in store for loftier virtue, and holier piety; and let him know, too, that compared with that loftier standard, he has almost as much reason to tremble for himself, as the poor sinner he looks down upon. For, if woes are denounced against the impenitent sinner, so are woes denounced, in terms scarcely less awful, against the secure, lukewarm, negligent Christian. God is no respecter of persons, nor of professions. It is written that "he will render to *every* man, according to his deeds." It is written, too, that "*whatsoever* a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

I repeat that language of fearful discrimination, "*whatsoever* — a man *soweth* — *that* — not something else — *that* — shall he also *reap*." That which you *are doing* — be it good or evil, be it grave or gay — that which you are doing to-day and to-morrow, — each thought, each feeling, each action, each event; every passing hour, every breathing moment, is contributing to form the character by which you are to be judged. Every particle of influence that goes to form that aggregate, your character, shall, in that future scrutiny, be sifted out from the mass, and shall fall, particle by particle, with ages perhaps intervening — shall fall, a distinct contribution to the sum of your joys or your woes. Thus every idle word, every idle hour, shall give answer in the judgment.

•Think not, against the closeness and severity of this inquisition, to put up any barrier of theological speculation. Conversion, repentance, pardon, mean they what they will, mean nothing that will save you from reaping, down to the very root and ground of good or evil, that which you have sowed. Think not to wrap that future world in

any blackness of darkness, or any folding flame, as if, for the imagination to be alarmed, were all you had to feel, or fear. Clearly, distinctly shall the voice of accusation fall upon the guilty ear; as when upon earth, the man of crime comes reluctantly forth from his hiding-place, and stands at the bar of his country's justice, and the voices of his associates say, "thou didst it!" If there be any unchangeable, any adamant fate in the universe, this is that fate — that the future shall forever bring forth the fruits of the past.

Take care, then, what thou sowest, as if thou wert taking care for eternity. That sowing, of which the scripture speaketh, what is it? Yesterday, perhaps, some evil temptation came upon you — the opportunity of unrighteous gain, or of unhallowed indulgence, came, either in the sphere of business, or of pleasure, of society, or of solitude. If you yielded to it, then and there, did you plant a seed of bitterness and sorrow. To-morrow, it may be, will threaten discovery; and agitated, alarmed, you will cover the sin, and bury it deeper, in falsehood and hypocrisy. In the hiding bosom, in the fruitful soil of kindred vices, that sin dies not, but thrives and grows; and other, and still other germs of evil gather around the accursed root, till from that single seed of corruption, there springs up in the soul all that is horrible in habitual lying, knavery, or vice. Long before such a life comes to its close, its poor victim may have advanced within the very precincts of hell. Yes, the hell of debt, of disease, of ignominy, or of remorse, may gather its shadows around the steps of the transgressor, even on earth; and yet these, — if holy scripture be unerring, and sure experience be prophetic — these are but the beginnings of sorrows. The evil deed may be done, alas! in a mo-

ment — in one fatal moment ; but conscience never dies ; memory never sleeps : guilt never can become innocence ; and remorse can never, never whisper peace. Pardon may come from heaven ; but self-forgiveness may never come.

Beware, then, thou who art tempted to evil — and every being before me is tempted to evil — beware what thou layest up for the future ; beware what thou layest up in the archives of eternity. Thou who wouldst wrong thy neighbor, beware ! lest the thought of that injured man, wounded and suffering from thine injury, be a pang which a thousand years may not deprive of its bitterness. Thou who wouldst break into the house of innocence, and rifle it of its treasure, beware ! lest, when a thousand ages have rolled their billows over thee, the moan of its distress may not have died away from thine ear. Thou who wouldst build the desolate throne of ambition in thy heart, beware what thou art doing with all thy devices, and circumventings, and selfish schemings ! lest desolation and loneliness be on thy path as it stretches into the long futurity. Thou, in fine, who art living a negligent and irreligious life, beware ! beware how thou livest — for bound up with that life is the immutable principle of an endless retribution — bound up with that life are elements of God's creating, which shall never spend their force, — which shall be unfolding and unfolding with the ages of eternity. Beware ! I say once more, and be not deceived. *Be not deceived* ; God is not mocked ; God who has formed thy nature thus to answer to the future, is not mocked ; his law can never be abrogated, his justice can never be eluded ; beware, then — be forewarned ; since, forever, and forever will it be true, that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap !

DISCOURSE II.

GALATIANS, VI., 7.

“Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”

THE views which are usually presented of a future retribution, are characterized, as I have observed in my last discourse, rather by strength than by strictness of representation. The great evil attending the common statements of this doctrine, I shall now venture to say, is, not that they are too alarming. Men are not enough alarmed at the dangers of a sinful course. No men are; no men, though they sit under the most terrifying dispensation of preaching that ever was devised. But the evil is, that alarm is addressed too much to the imagination, and too little to the reason and conscience. Neither Whitfield, nor Baxter, nor Edwards, — though the horror produced by his celebrated sermon “on the justice of God in the damnation of sinners,” is a matter of tradition in New England, to this very day — yet, no one of them ever preached too much terror, though they may

have preached it too exclusively; but the evil was, that they preached terror, I repeat, too much to the imagination, and too little to the reason and conscience. Of mere fright, there may be too much; but of real, rational fear, there never *can* be too much. Sin, vice, a corrupt mind, a guilty life, and the woes naturally flowing from these, never can be too much dreaded. It is one thing, for the preacher to deal in mathematical calculations of infinite suffering, to dwell upon the eternity of hell torments, to speak of literal fires, and of burning in them for ever; and with these representations, it is easy to scare the imagination, to awaken horror, and a horror so great, as to be at war with the clear, calm, and faithful discriminations of conscience. With such means, it is easy to produce a great excitement in the mind. But he who should, or who *could*, unveil the realities of a strict and spiritual retribution, show what every sinner loses, show what every sinner must suffer, in and through the very character he forms, show, too, how bitterly every good man must sorrow for every sin, here or hereafter, show, in fine, what sin is, and forever must be, to an immortal nature, would make an impression more deep, and sober, and effectual.

It is not my purpose at present to attempt any detail of this nature, though I shall be governed by the observations I have made, in the views which I *am* to present, and for which I venture to ask a rational, and calm, and most serious consideration.

The future is to answer for the present. This is the great law of retribution. And so obviously necessary and just is it; so evidently does our character create our welfare or wo; so certainly must it give us pain or pleas-

ure, as long as it goes with us, whether in this world or another world, that it seems less requisite to support the doctrine by argument, than to save it from evasions.

There are such evasions. No theology has yet come up to the strictness of this law. It is still more true, that no practice has yet come up to it. There are theoretical evasions, — and I think they are to be found in the views which are often presented, of conversion, and repentance, and of God's mercy, and the actual scenes of retribution; but there is one practical evasion, one into which the whole world has fallen, and so dangerous, so momentous in its danger, that it may well deserve, for one season of meditation, I believe, to engross our entire and undivided attention.

This grand evasion, this great and fatal mistake, may be stated in general terms to be, *the substitution of something as a preparation for future happiness, in place of devoting the whole life to it*; or to a course which is fitted to procure it. This evasion takes the particular form, perhaps, of an expectation that some sudden and extraordinary experience may, at a future time, accomplish what is necessary to prepare the mind for happiness and heaven; or that certain circumstances, such as sickness and affliction, may, at some subsequent period of life, force the growth of that, which is not cultivated now; and may thus remedy the fearful and fatal neglect; or it is an expectation — and this is the most prevalent form of the error, — that old age or death, when it comes, will have power to penetrate the heart with emotion, and subdue it to repentance, and prepare it for heaven. The subject — yet, it must be feared to be the victim — of this stupendous error, is convinced that in order to be

happy eventually, he must become pure ; — there is no principle of indulgence, there is no gospel of mercy, that can absolve him from that necessity — he must become pure ; he must be pious ; his nature must be exalted and refined. It is his nature, his mind, that is to be happy, and he is convinced by experience, that his mind must be cultivated, purified, prepared, for that end. But he is not doing this work to-day, nor does he expect to do it to-morrow ; he is not doing it this month, nor does he expect to do it next month ; he is not doing it this year, nor does he, in particular, expect to do it next year ; and thus, month after month, and year after year are passing, and one season of life after another is stealing away : and the only hope is, that in some tremendous exigency, or by some violent paroxysm, when fear and remorse and disease and death are darkly struggling together, *that* may be done, for which the whole previous course of life has not been found sufficient.

But is it true — for I am willing to pause at this point, and deliberately to consider the question — is it true, can it be true, some one may ask, that a mistake so gross, so irrational, so at war with all that we know about character, about its formation, and its necessary results — can it be true, that such a mistake, about the whole vast concern of our happiness, is actually made by any of us ? Can it be, you will say, that men, with reason, and experience, and Scripture to guide them, — can it be that men in their senses, are substituting in place of that deliberate formation of their character for happiness, for which life is given, some brief preparation for it, at a future period, and especially at the last period of their lives ?

I am persuaded that it is true, my brethren, however

strange; and these are the considerations that convince me of it.

In the first place there are multitudes around us, that hope and expect to be happy hereafter, who are conscious, that they are not preparing for it; who acknowledge at every successive stage of life, that if they were instantly to die, without any further opportunity to prepare for it, there would be little or no hope for them; who feel that, if the very character which they are now, every day, forming, were to go to the judgment, their case would be desperate; who hope therefore, most evidently, not to be judged by the prevailing tenor of their lives, but secretly expect to do something at last, to retrieve the errors, the follies, and sins, which they are now daily committing.

Again; although it is a common impression, that but *few* live in an habitual preparation for heaven, the impression is almost *as* common, that but few actually *die* unprepared. Of almost every individual, who leaves the world, something is told, which encourages the hopes of survivors concerning him. I stand before you, my brethren, as a Christian minister, and I solemnly declare, that familiar as I have been with that sad and mournful scene, the death of the wicked, it has almost invariably left this strange and delusive hope behind it. Indeed, the extreme solicitude with which every symptom of preparation is marked in these circumstances, the trembling anxiety with which every word and look, is caught, but too plainly indicate the same impression. What the amount of this proof is, we will presently consider. It is sufficient at this point of the inquiry, to state, that it is collected and arranged as carefully, and offered as confidently, as if it were material; that it encourages

those who repeat and those who hear it; that the instance of death is very rare, in which surviving friends do not tell you that they trust and believe that all is well. Even when a man has led an eminently pious life, many are apt to feel as if the proof of his piety was not consummated, unless he had died a happy and triumphant death: as though it were to be expected — it may happen so, indeed, and we have great cause to thank God when it does — but as though it were to be expected, and looked for as a matter of course, that in feebleness and distress of body and mind, and the sinking of all the faculties, the mind should exhibit its utmost energy — as if, amid the cold damps of death, the expiring flame of sensibility should rise the highest. It is to be feared that good men, and with the best intentions, no doubt, have yet given great distress to many faithful Christians, and done great injury to others, by countenancing this unreasonable notion. The great question is, not how a good man dies, but how he *has lived*.

The third and final reason, which convinces me of the prevalence of this mistake which I am considering, is the almost universal dread of sudden death. It is not to be denied, indeed, that a change so great as that of death, and so mysterious too, is, in itself, and naturally, fitted to awaken a feeling of apprehension. But I maintain, that the principal reason for this apprehension, is the fear of consequences, “the dread of something *after* death;” and that there is a vague hope in almost every mind, that some preparation could be made, at the last, if only a little time were granted for it. And, indeed, if we all entertained a settled conviction, that we are to reap as we have sowed, that we are to be miserable or happy in

the other world, according to the character we have formed in this, that we are to be judged by the life we live, and not by the death we die; what would it import to us, whether we fell suddenly, in the paths of life, or slowly declined from them — whether we sunk at once beneath the stroke of an apoplexy, or more slowly under the attack of a consumption? Something, it would import to us, no doubt, as friends; for we should wish to give our dying counsels; but as expectants of retribution, what could the time of a week or a month's last sickness avail us? I will answer: and I say, as much, — by the most favorable supposition, — as much as such a space of time, in any part of life could avail us; and no more.

Such then and so fearful, and proved to be so fearful by the plainest indications, is the moral state of multitudes. Life is given them for the cultivation of a sacred virtue, of a lofty piety, of pure and godlike affections, as the only way to future improvement and happiness. They are not devoting life to this end; they know they are not; they confess they are not; and their hope is — yes, the hope, on which they rest their whole being is, that by some hasty effort or paroxysm of emotion, in the feeble and helpless time of sickness, or in the dark day of death, they shall be able to redeem the lost hope of a negligent life. If only a week or a month of health were offered them to prepare; if that specific time, a week or a month, were taken out from the midst of life, and they were solemnly told that this would be all the time they would have to prepare for eternity, they would be in despair; and yet they hope to do this, in a month or a week of pain and languishment and distracting agitation. It is, as if the husbandman should sport away the summer season,

and then should think to retrieve his error, by planting his fields in the autumn. It is as if the student should trifle away the season appointed for his education, and then, when the time came for entering upon his profession, should think to make up for his deficiencies, by a few weeks of violent, hurried and irregular application. It shows, alas! that the world, with all its boasts of an enlightened age, has not yet escaped the folly of those days of superstition, when the eucharist was administered to dying persons, and was forcibly administered, if the patient had no longer sense to receive it; or when men deferred their baptism till death; as if the future state were to depend on these last ceremonies. And as well depend on ceremonies — and more consistently could we do so, — as depend on any momentary preparation for happiness. As well build a church or a monastery to atone for our sins, as to build that fabric of error in our imagination.

It is not for us, I know, to limit the Almighty! It is not for us to say, that he cannot change the soul in the last moments of its stay on earth. But this we may fearlessly say; that he does it, if at all, by a miraculous agency, of whose working we can have no conception, and of whose results, by the very supposition, we can have no knowledge.

I desire, my brethren, to state this point with all sufficient caution. I not only do not deny, that God has power to convert the soul in the last moments of life, but I do not absolutely deny that there may be some such instances in the passing away of every generation. I do not know, and none of us can know, whether such miracles are performed or not. It is commonly thought that

the case recorded in Luke's Gospel, of the thief on the cross, is an instance of this nature. But I do not think it can be pronounced to be such. We know not how much time he may have had, to repent and form a new character. He says, "we indeed suffer justly;" but the act for which he suffered, may have been a single act, in which he had fallen from a generally good life. But admit that such interpositions do take place; is it safe to rely upon them? We do not know that they do. We do not know, that in the passing away of all the generations of mankind, there has been one such instance. Is it safe to rely, in so tremendous a case, upon what we do not know, and upon what, after all, may never be? My object is to show that it is not safe; and for this purpose, I shall reason upon the general principle. The general principle is that the future must answer for the present; the future of this life, for the present of this life; the next month for this month: the next year for this year; and in the same way, the next life for this life. I say, then, that the expectation of any hasty retrieving of a bad month, of a bad year, of a bad life, is irrational, and unwarrantable, and ought to be considered as desperate.

I. And for the purpose of showing this, I observe, in the first place, that the expectation of preparing for futurity hastily, or by any other means, than the voluntary and deliberate formation of right and virtuous habits in the mind; or that the expectation of preparing for death when it comes, is opposed to the professed import of that Sacred Volume, which gives law alike to our hopes and our fears.

It is opposed to the obvious, and the professed, and the

leading character of the Bible. What is that character? What is the Bible? It is a revelation of laws, motives, directions, and excitements, to religious virtue. But all of these are useless, if this character is to be formed by a miraculous energy, at a perilous conjuncture, or in a last moment. Motives must be contemplated, directions must be understood, excitements must be felt, to be effectual; and all this must be done deliberately, must be many times repeated, must be combined with diligence and patience and faith, and must be slowly, as every thing is, slowly wrought into the character, in order to be effectual.

But it may be said, "if the rule is so strict, where is the *mercy* of the Gospel?" I answer that its very mercy is engaged to make us pure; that its mercy would be no mercy, if it did not do this; and that, of becoming pure and good, there is but one way; and that is the way of voluntary effort—an effort to be assisted by divine grace, indeed, but none the less, on that account, an effort and an endeavor, a watching and a striving, a conflict and a victory. I answer, again; that the mercy of the Gospel is a moral and rational, a high and glorious principle. It is not a principle of laxity in morals. It is not a principle of indulgence to the heart. It is a moral principle, and not a wonder-working machinery, by which a man is to be lifted up and borne away from guilt to purity, from earth to heaven, he knows not how. It offers to fabricate no wings for the immortal flight. It is a rational principle; and is not based upon the subversion of all the laws of experience and wisdom. The Gospel opens the *way* to heaven—opens the way, to poor, sinful, ill-deserving creatures. Is not that mercy

enough? Shall the guilty and lost spurn that, and demand more? It opens the way, I repeat; but then, it lays its instructions, commands, and warnings, thickly upon that way. With unnumbered directions to faith, and patience, and prayer, and toil, and self-denial, it marks out every step of that way. It tells us, again and again, that *such* is its way of salvation, and no other. In other words, it offers us happiness, and prescribes the terms. And those terms, if they were of a meaner character, if they were low and lax, would degrade even our nature, and we could not respect them. It would, in fact, be no mercy to natures like ours, to treat them in any other way.

In speaking of the scriptural representations on this subject, the parable of "the laborers in the vineyard" may probably occur to you, in which he who came at the eleventh hour, received as much as he who had borne the heat and burden of the day. I suppose the parable has no relation whatever to this subject. It cannot intend to teach that he who is a Christian during his whole life, is no more an object of the divine approbation, and is to be no more happy, than he who is so, for a very small part of it. It evidently refers to the introduction of the Christian dispensation; it relates to the Jews and Gentiles, as nations: meaning that the Gentiles, who came later into covenant with God, would be as favorably received as the Jews.

To interpret this parable as encouraging men to put off their preparation for futurity till death, if there were no other objection, would contradict, I repeat, all the scriptural information we have on this subject. This would appear, if you should carry to the oracles of divine

truth, any question whatever, about piety, or virtue, or the qualification for heaven. What is piety itself? A momentary exercise, or a habit? Something thrown into the heart in a mass; or a state of the heart itself, formed by long effort and care? Does the great qualification for heaven consist in one, two, or ten good exercises; or in a good character? And to what is that judgment to relate, which will decide our future condition? "Who will render, says the sacred record, to every man according to his deeds!"

Open that most solemn and formal account of the judgment contained in the 25th chapter of Matthew; and what is the great test? I still answer, deeds; deeds of piety and charity, the conduct, the character, the permanent affections of each individual. But still further to decide the question, if it can be necessary, let it be asked, what is that heaven of which we hear and say so much? What is heaven? Are we still, like children, fancying that heaven is a beautiful city, into which one needs only the powers of locomotion to enter? Do we not know that heaven is in the mind; in the greatness and purity and elevation of our immortal nature? If piety and virtue then are a habit and state of mind expressed and acted out in a life, that is holy; if the judgment has relation to this alone; if heaven consist in this; what hope can there be in a brief and slight preparation?

II. No, my friends, the terms on which we receive happiness — and I now appeal to reason in the second place — the terms on which we receive true, moral, satisfying happiness, cannot be easy. They are not; experience shows that they are not; life shows that they are not; and eternity will but develop the same strict law;

for it is a part of our nature; it is a part of the nature and reason of things. The senses may yield us such pleasure as they can yield, without effort; taste may delight us, and imagination may minister to us, in careless reverie; but conscience does not offer to us its happiness on such terms. I know not what may be the law for other beings, in some other sphere; but I know that no truly, morally, happy being was ever made here, but through much effort, long culture, frequent self-denial, and abiding faith, patience, and prayer. To be truly happy — what is so difficult? What is so rare? And is heaven, think you — the blessed consummation of all that man can ask, — to be obtained at less expense than it will cost to gain one pure, calm day upon earth? For even this comparatively trifling boon, one blessed day, one day of religious joy, one day of joy in meditation and prayer, one day of happiness that is spiritual, and not physical, nor circumstantial — even this comparatively slight boon, I say, cannot be gained without long preparation of mind, and heart, and habit. There are multitudes around us and of us, to whom, at this moment, one such day's happiness is a thing just as impossible, as it would be in that day to make a world! And shall they think to escape this very law of happiness under which they are actually living, and to fly away to heaven on the wings of imagination? — to pass at once from unfaithfulness to reward, from apathy to ecstasy, from the neglect and dislike of prayer to the blessed communion of heavenly worship, from this hour of being, absorbed in sense and the world, to an eternity of spiritual glory and triumph? No; be assured that facts are here, as they are every where, worth more than fancies — be they

those of dreaming visionaries or ingenious theologians; if you are not now happy in penitence, and humility, and prayer, and the love of God, you are not in fact prepared to be happy in them hereafter. No, between the actual state of mind prevailing in many, and the bliss of heaven, "there is a great gulf fixed" — over which no wing of mortal nor angel was ever spread. No; the law of essential, enduring, triumphant happiness, is labor and long preparation for it; and it is a law which will never, never — never be annulled!

There is a law, too, concerning habits. It is implied in the following language. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may those who are accustomed to do evil, learn to do well." Habit is no slight bond. Slightly at first, and gently afterwards, may it have drawn its silken cords around us; but not so are its bonds to be cast from us; nor can they, like a green withe, be broken by one gigantic effort. No, the bonds of habit are chains and fetters that must be worn off. Through the long process of slow and imperceptible degrees, they must be severed with weariness, and galling, and bitter anguish.

"Can it be supposed," says an eloquent writer, and preacher, "that, where the vigor of life has been spent in the establishment of vicious propensities; where all the vivacity of youth, and all the soberness of manhood, and all the wisdom of old age, have been given to the service of sin; where vice has been growing with the growth, and strengthening with the strength; where it has spread out with the limbs of the stripling, and become rigid with the fibres of the aged — can it, I say, be supposed, that the labors of such a life, are to be over-

thrown by one last exertion of the mind, impaired with disease; by the convulsive exercise of an affrighted spirit; and by the inarticulate and feeble sounds of an expiring breath?"

Besides, the rule is as equitable, as in the divine ordination of things, it is necessary. The judgment which ordains that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap, is a righteous judgment. It is easy, no doubt, to regret a bad life, when it is just over. When death comes, and the man must leave his sinful indulgences and pleasures; or, when he has no longer any capacity for enjoying them; when sickness has enfeebled the appetites, or age has chilled the passions, then, indeed, is it but a slight sacrifice, and a yet poorer merit in him, to feel regret. But regret, let it be considered, is not repentance! And while the former may be easy and almost involuntary, the other — the repentance — may be as hard as the adverse tendencies of a whole life can make it. Yes, the hardest of all things then, will be to repent. Yes, I repeat, that which is relied upon to save a man, after the best part of life has been lost, has become by the very habits of that life, almost a moral impossibility.

And the regret, the selfish regret — can it be accepted? I ask not if it can be accepted by our Maker; I doubt not his infinite mercy; but can it be accepted by our own nature? Can our nature be purified by it? Can the tears of that dark hour of selfish sorrow, or the awful insensibility which no tear comes to relieve — can either of them purge away from the bosom the stains of a life of sin? Let us never make the fearful experiment! Let us not go down to the last tremendous scene of life — there, amidst pain and distraction, with the work of life

to do! Let us not have to acquire peace from very terror, and hope from very despair; let us not, thus, trust ourselves to a judgment, "that will render unto us according to our deeds;" that will render — mark the explanation — "to them, who by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, honor and immortality, eternal life; but tribulation and anguish to every soul that doeth evil."

III. From these views of our subject, drawn from scripture, and reason, let me, in the third and last place, refer to a no less decisive consideration which is independent of them; a consideration fully borne out by melancholy facts. It is this: that every man will die, very much as he lives: I mean, that in his character, his habits of feeling, he will. There is not this wide difference, between the living world and the dying world, which is generally supposed. Character, as I have contended, and as we all see, indeed, is not formed in a moment; it cannot, upon any known law or principle — it cannot, but in contradiction to every known law and principle, be changed in a moment. Christianity has introduced no law, in subversion of the great laws of experience, and rational motive, and moral action, or of its own established principles. Its doctrine of conversion is only misunderstood when it is supposed to provide a briefer and easier way of preparation for heaven, than watching and striving, and persevering in virtue, and patient continuance in well-doing. I say, therefore, and repeat the certain and solemn truth, that every man will die the same — essentially the same, that he has lived.

For the correctness of this conclusion, I have soon to refer to a single, and, as it seems to me, momentous fact. But in the meantime, let me remark that there is one

question here, which I view with a kind of apprehension I scarcely know how to express; with almost a dread, for once, to ask what the simple truth is.

My brethren, we are sometimes called upon to pray for a change of heart, in the sinful and negligent man, as he is drawing nigh, in horror and agony, his last hour! It is an awful situation even to him, who only ministers at that dying bed. What shall he *do*—what *can* be done?—I have asked myself. Shall I discourage prayer, even in the uttermost extremity? Can I, when I hear from those lips that are soon to be sealed in death, the pathetic entreaty, “Oh! pray”—can I refuse to pray? I do not; I cannot. Prayer is our duty; events are with God. But I must say, I will say—I will tell the negligent man beforehand, what I fear. I fear, I do fear, that such praying is nothing better than the supplication of our terror and despair! I fear, that it is altogether an irrational and unauthorized praying! I fear that it is like praying, that guilt, and even a whole life of it, may feel no enduring remorse, that sin may not be followed by sorrow, that vice may leap at once to the rewards of virtue, that the sword which a man has plunged into his bosom, may not wound him, or that the envenomed draught he has taken, may not poison! I fear that it is, as if we should take our station on the banks of the mighty river, that is pouring its accumulated waters into the ocean, and pray that they may turn back to their fountain-head; or as if we should gaze upon the descending sun in heaven, and pray that he may stand still in his course! I tremble with a strange misgiving, as if it were a praying not to God, but against God!

For, what is this prayer? It cannot harm us to make

the inquiry now, before that crisis comes. What is this prayer? It is a prayer that the flow of moral habits may turn back to its source; that the great course of moral causes and effects may all be stopped; that the great laws of the moral universe may all be suspended. It is praying against many a solemn declaration of Holy Writ. And will it — I ask — will the prayer be heard? Again, I tremble, at that question: again, my misgivings come over me; I ask — but I know not what to answer. I know in fact — I may conjecture, and hope — but I *know* of no answer to that awful question, unless it be in this more awful language. “Be not deceived” — it sounds like a warning in my ear — “be not deceived: God is not mocked:” — man’s indulgence may flatter him; plausible systems of his own devising may encourage him to venture his soul upon an easier way of salvation; and weaker bands than those of almighty justice might have been escaped, but — “God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth” — not what he wishes, when the seeds of sin are implanted, and have sprung up, have grown to maturity — I cannot read it so — but, “whatsoever a man soweth, *that* shall he also reap.”

Tell me not the oft-repeated tale, of a death-bed repentance. I turn to it an incredulous ear. What does it amount to, even when it comes with the kindest testimony of partial affection? Alas! it is doubtful, even in its utmost latitude, and in the moment when it claims our utmost sympathy. For what is it? It is, that the subject of this charitable judgment, was willing to die, when to die was inevitable; that he sought for pardon, when he felt that he must be pardoned or perish in his sins: that he prayed, but it was when *Atheists* have prayed;

that he hoped; ah! he hoped, when it had become too terrible to despair!

And now what is the result? What is it, that the issue of all this fearful, I cannot call it flattering, experience tells us? What is the fact, on which this solemn conclusion, concerning the inefficacy of a death-bed repentance, rests? In many cases it is revealed only in another world, and is beyond our scrutiny. But when it is known, I beg it may be solemnly considered what it is, and what is its bearing on the hopes of a death-bed repentance. The result is — and I speak, let it be repeated, of a fact — the result is almost without exception, in cases where the subject of such experience recovers, that he returns to his old habits of living; without any, or any but a very slight and temporary change. In many such instances, where the experience has been very bright and convincing, the individual retains no recollection of any thing he said, or was supposed to have felt. It was all a delirium. The moral state as well as the mental state, was all delirium. And there is too much reason to fear that all such experience is a moral delirium, at best. — I would not willingly disturb, for one moment, the peace of a fond and anxious friendship. I will not speak of the state of those, who are dead; but I must speak of the dangers of those, who are living. And surely, if there are any, this side of the retributions of eternity, who could most fearfully warn you not to postpone religion to a dying hour, it would be those, who have hung with anxious watchings around the last hours of the disobedient and irreligious, and have trembled, and prayed, and wept for their welfare!

My friends, I have only time to present to you and to

myself, one practical question ; *are we habitually ready to die ?* The question, my brethren, is not, whether we expect to be ready at some future time. It is not whether we mean to be ready. It is not whether we are making the most solemn promises to ourselves that we will, some time, set about the preparation for that great hour. But the question is, are we ready for it now ? Are we habitually ready ? Are we convinced that we are to be judged not by some imaginary life which we intend, and intend, and forever intend to lead, and which we never do lead, because we are always intending it — are we convinced, I say, that we are to be judged not by that imaginary life which we are forever intending to lead, but by the life which we are now actually living ? Have we given up the folly of expecting to do any thing in future, which we will not do now ; of expecting to do that in sickness, which we cannot do in health ; of expecting to do that in death, which we cannot do in life ? Are we doing just as much to prepare as if the judgment were to depend on what we are doing — for it is to depend on what we are doing, and doing, and doing, through the whole of life — as much, I say, as if the judgment were to depend on these hourly deeds which we are now performing, on these momentary feelings which we are now cherishing ? — If not, then, there ought to be a revolution in our lives — call it conversion, regeneration, a change of heart, I care not by what name — but, I say, that there ought to be a revolution in our lives, of such magnitude and moment, that the eternal judgment only can declare it ! Are we, then, habitually ready to die ? If not habitually, we never are, for religion is a habit. If not habitually ; if not, at least, habitually *making our-*

selves ready, there is reason to fear that we never shall be; for life — do you not perceive? — is a tissue of thoughts, purposes and feelings, which is growing stronger, as it lengthens, so that the disinclination to prepare for death is growing every moment, while, every moment, the time for it lessens.

There is a vague notion — for it is the hope of all that death will not break into the midst of life — a vague notion, with many, of retiring in advancing years from the cares and business of life to make this preparation, which involves great and hazardous mistake. They seem to think that the heart will become pure and spiritual and heavenly, as the state of life becomes quiet and free from the urgency of worldly cares. Delusive expectation! — as if all growth in nature were not most vigorous amidst calm and silence: as if, in like manner, the rooted passions of the soul were not likely to grow stronger and more stubborn, amidst the silence and quietude of declining years? What is the fact? Did you ever *see* selfishness, or avarice, or a worldly mind, lose its accustomed power in such circumstances? On the contrary, we know — who has not witnessed sad and striking instances of it — we know, that nothing is more common, than for avarice and worldliness to find strength in leisure and freedom in retirement: that they fix a stronger grasp upon the decaying faculties, and fling their icy bonds over the soul amidst the winter of age. As well might the Ethiopian change his complexion, by retiring from the scorching sun, to his shaded hut: as soon might the leopard lose his spots, barely by plunging into the solitudes of the wilderness; when the flood could not wash them away. — The waters of death are not waters

of ablution, but rather do they give the coloring and complexion to our destiny. They are not a slow and oblivious stream; but rather a rushing torrent that bears us away, before we are aware. Death comes suddenly to all. It does break sooner or later into the midst of life. It comes at a time when we think not. It comes, not when all our plans are ready for it; not with harbingers and prophecies and preparations; not with a heart-thrilling message, saying, "set thy house in order; for this year thou shalt die;" no voice is in the infectious breath of the air that brings contagion and death with it; no coming step startles us when disease is approaching; no summoning hand knocks at the gate of life, when its last dread foe is about to enter its dark and guarded passages; no monitory conviction within, says, "this month — this week I shall die!" No, it comes at a time when we think not; it comes upon an unprepared hour, unless our life be preparation; it finds us with all our faults, with all our sins about us; it finds us, that which life has made us — finds us such as the very action, habit, and spirit of life, have made us — and bids us die, such as we lived!

Who of *you* will meet his end when he expects it? Perhaps not one. Or, if you should, how solemn a message would you address to the living! Who of us has, in our own apprehension, been brought to such a crisis, but has had thoughts, which no language can utter, on this momentous concern? We felt that then was not the time to prepare. "Oh! not now — not here!" is the language of the dying man, as with broken utterance, and the failing and faltering breath of life he testifies his last conviction, "not now — not here, is the place or the

time, to prepare for death!" And he feels, too, that all which the world contains, vanishes into nothing, compared with this preparation! Are we, then, prepared? — not by a preternatural or extravagant state of feeling; not by glooms, nor by raptures; nor by any assurance, nor by any horror of mind; but by the habitual and calm discharge of our duty, by labors of kindness, by the spirit of devotion? — by a temper of mind, kindred to that heaven which we hope to enter? Are we thus ready, every day, every hour? On the exchange, in the office, in the study; in the house and by the way; in the workshop, and in the field; are we ever ready? "Blessed are those servants, whom the Lord when he cometh shall find watching; — and if he shall come, in the second watch, or in the third watch, and find them so, Blessed are those servants."

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